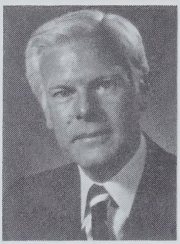
OTEC/370.9713/059DE/Mp

Ministry
of
Education

Moral Leadership in the Schools

Hon. Thomas L. Wells
Minister of Education, Ontario

June 18, 1978



Text of an address by Mr. Wells to the First Congress on Education, sponsored by the Canadian School Trustees' Association. Harbour Castle Hilton Hotel, Toronto.

Most people are fully aware of the credibility problem which education has faced in recent years, not only in Canada, but in the United States and in other countries as well.

Some of the criticism which has been expressed has been specific and direct, pinpointing one aspect of the school system or another as needing improvement or change. Much of the criticism, however, has been generalized and scatter-gun in nature, lacking in specifics and very difficult to come to grips with.

The only real message to be taken from this is that there is a general malaise – a feeling of uneasiness, of apprehension – among many citizens, many of them very thoughtful and articulate, about the overall performance of the school system.

For legislators and educators and others concerned with the operation and management of school systems, the task of addressing this malaise has been difficult and confusing. The amorphous nature of the public apprehension makes it very difficult indeed for those in positions of responsibility to take clear-cut corrective action.

One target: "the basics"

Quite obviously, there has emerged in the last three or four years one major target area which has been singled out for remedial attention. This is the visible and crucial area related to the basic skills – the 3 R's, or whatever other label you might wish to use.

There are few provinces or states on this continent which have not taken some action in this area in recent years. This action has manifested itself in several forms, including most notably a tightening of curriculum requirements and, in many areas, a new emphasis on testing to assess pupil achievement.

Ontario was certainly among those jurisdictions which acted:

- We redefined our elementary school curriculum, emphasizing the fundamental skills, and we went to great lengths to reassure the public that the basic skills were being restressed, as indeed they were.
- We increased the number of required

subjects to be taken by students in the first two years of high school.

• We produced new curriculum guidelines in English, Canadian History and Canadian Geography, and are presently re-writing Science and Mathematics curriculum, adding more common core substance and practical guidance for teachers.

• We became very active in looking at the whole area of testing and evaluation with a view to initiating steps which could assist teachers in better assessing pupil performance, and reporting upon it to parents.

In my judgement at the time – which I believe, in retrospect, has been verified – these kinds of steps were essential not only educationally but also to provide parents and the public with a reassurance that the schools do indeed have a firm grasp of their role and function.

The basics, of course, are vital. The schools must always strive to do the best possible job in the fundamental learning skills – and policies at all levels must be designed to elicit the best.

Today, in Ontario – and in most other jurisdictions too, I suspect – our schools by and large are doing a good job on the basics. Although we have a lack of formal evidence, I really don't believe that any fair and knowledgeable observer who has looked carefully at our system could feel that the schools are failing in their primary task. Indeed, in a recent survey conducted by Goldfarb and Associates for the *Toronto Star*, 78% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with their children's progress at school.

Although some parents undoubtedly have cause for legitimate concern, most parents, I think, have wondered what all the sound and fury is about. What they see in their *own* family experience are children who can read and write and calculate very well indeed. They see children who are knowledgeable about a host of things about which schools in earlier generations left us ignorant.

But let me return to the public malaise which I mentioned.

While the various steps which we and others have taken in recent years have been broadly welcomed not only by the general public but

also, by and large, by the education community itself – at least this has been our general experience in Ontario – there remains, still, vaguely-expressed apprehensions and concern.

I don't want to minimize the corrective actions which have been implemented in our curriculum. As I said, they were expected and they were needed. But my point to you today is that I am inclined to believe that this is not the only issue of concern.

Concern about schools' values

I submit to you that, even when people explicitly complain about a standard of achievement that is perceived to be inadequate, the concern is quite often *not* with the achievement per se.

It is, rather, a broader concern about the value system that is perceived to pervade the schools and the students as the products of the schools' value system – a system which seems to tacitly accept a standard which is judged to be less that the best which could be achieved.

In my opinion, there is a deep and pervasive public concern about the attitudes and values which the school system is seen as accepting – and by accepting, is seen as condoning and encouraging in the actions of its students.

The defenders of the system, of course, and I am one, will be quick to point out that the school does not exist in a vacuum – and that it merely mirrors the values of the society with which it is contemporary. This may be true to a certain extent. But it is precisely in this passive reflection that the concern lies. In my view, the public does not really want a morally passive school system.

Schools should set an example

Possibly I over-simplify. But I believe that the public wants the school system to reflect – in the values to which it is formally committed and which it overtly practices – the highest ideals of human conduct and the general values upon which our country and our society have been built.

I believe that many people are profoundly uneasy with what they perceive to be a growing

tendency of the system to accept as the norm of school life standards of behaviour and underlying values which (human frailty being what it is) we reluctantly accept as the norm of everyday life.

I readily admit that this will sound to some people like another will-o'-the-wisp abstraction. But there is more to it than that, I believe.

I think that there is an underlying, if sometimes poorly articulated, desire for what might be called moral leadership from the schools.

I say this notwithstanding the fact that our society in general sometimes seems to have abandoned standards which – since pioneer days – have been considered to be the backbone of our way of life.

Sharp reminder of public's view

Those of you from Ontario will remember the startling reminder of this which we received back about five years ago. We were in the process of consolidating five existing Acts concerning education into one – and I drew attention to the fact that, in the proposed new Act, we had inadvertently omitted an old requirement that teachers "inculcate by precept and example" a long list of values.

It stated that teachers should exhibit "the highest regard for truth, justice, loyalty, love of country, humanity, benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality, purity, temperance and" (if that weren't enough) "all other virtues."

That provision had been in the statutes since legislation covering education in this province was first written, well back into the last Century. Be that as it may, we quickly learned that people did not want the requirement removed. People perceived that its omission would have signified a dilution of the proper direction of the schools.

Never, previously or since, have I had a greater public response on any issue during my time as Minister of Education. We received close to 7,000 letters from citizens, and there were countless letters and editorials in newspapers on the same issue. I might say, that the section remains in the Ontario Education Act.

Is it possible for the schools to do other than reflect the reality of society's behaviour around

it? The conventional wisdom suggests not. The school, it is said, is but a mirror of society itself. But is it? Or need it be?

School is its own society

In many ways, the school is its own society. It is a self-contained community of students and teachers – open, of course, to the influences around it, but in large measure establishing its own rules and norms of behaviour.

It is perhaps possible, under these circumstances, for the school to choose – consciously and deliberately – the rules and behaviours that reflect the highest and most universal ideals of the society around it.

We have, of course, always been concerned with the value system of the schools. Some of you will accuse me of re-stating what may seem to be obvious. Many of you, I am sure, have no doubt whatever that the schools should be doing exactly what I have outlined.

But I do not think that the public clearly perceives the schools as acting in that way. Frankly, most people would say that they cannot see any very clear value orientation in the schools – and for that reason they are concerned. They say, for instance, that there is no discipline present in the schools anymore.

Reaffirm our commitment

Just as we recently found it necessary to re-affirm to the public the fact that the schools are committed to the basics of learning, *perhaps we now need to go on and re-affirm to the public that the schools in Canada are similarly committed to other values that are basic to our life together as human beings, and as democratic Canadians.*

In recent years we have found it difficult to formulate such a re-affirmation, either provincially or locally. The Second World War, and the technological changes that have transformed the post-war world, have very naturally left us reticent about affirming – in any absolute sense – the primacy of any particular set of values.

There has been an uncertainty reflected in society and in the schools about stating those

values that are basic to our way of life. There has been an even *greater* uncertainty about articulating such values as a standard for the schools.

However, to paraphrase the old saying: "There is a time for everything, and everything in its time."

What I am saying now, then, is that the time is here when we must systematically examine what we are doing in this area, and deliberately plan to do it better. John Dewey said years ago that "It is a commonplace of educational theory that the establishing of character is a comprehensive aim of school instruction and discipline."

While we could not positively define the institutional value-orientation of our school system in a time of incredible change, it seems to me that, today, circumstances are such that we can and we must.

Let me mention a concern at this point which arises in my mind, and one which perhaps many of you share. It is this: *can* we develop an approach to moral and values education that is not based on a definite foundation of beliefs such as are found in a religion? I think probably we can, and a good start has already been made in some schools. But in doing so, we must be careful to present a program that eliminates any narrow sectarian approach.

Schools aren't morally neutral

As Minister of Education, and as a parent of children in the schools, and as a ratepayer who supports the public schools, I know that schools are not morally neutral. Schools are communities of people – teachers and students – who are part of a larger community. Moral convictions and values govern the personal relationships of people as surely as laws govern our public actions, and economics govern our financial transactions.

As every parent knows, as every teacher knows, as every politician knows, the beliefs that people have about values underlie and govern their actions. Schools, then, because they are people places, are influenced by the values of the people who have influence or control in them.

Schools have supplementary role

I do not believe that schools have the basic or fundamental responsibility for moral education or the development of values among young people. That is first and foremost the duty of the parents at home, assisted in many cases by the church. But the school cannot ignore this vital area of human experience, as some say it should. The fact of life is that values direct and govern the actions of people, and as I said before, schools are people places.

What, then, is the proper role for the school in all of this? Speaking both as a parent and layman, and in my official capacity, *I believe that schools must increasingly plan for the inclusion of moral and values education in their programs.* In spite of the serious concerns involved, we must expand the promising start that has been made already in some of our schools. All teachers must face up to the fact that they, like parents, are moral examples for our children. Almost everything that happens in a school in one way or another has a moral colouring.

An easy task it will not be. But I do not think that it is impossible. There are many types of values, but we can most surely come to a general consensus:

- about those which can and should be left to the discretion of the individual;
- and about those which are essential to social life in a human community – and for which the institutions of society, including the schools, should formally and overtly seek understanding and commitment.

These are values which, in a general sense, have to do with our dealings with each other, not only in our personal relationships but also collectively as a democratic society.

Perhaps the time has come when the educational community of parents, students, teachers, administrators, trustees and the public they represent can find some agreement on and spell out clearly the particular values which we can all support.

The public expects the schools to be very positive about values such as the acquisition of knowledge and learning skills – or the pursuit

of excellence, for example. And I also believe that the public expects the schools to be equally positive about certain other values of a *moral* nature which are agreed upon by the large majority within a concerned society.

Some simple examples

I wouldn't presume to try to present a definitive list here – but merely as examples to illustrate, I will mention four that come quickly to mind:

Respect for others as persons, from which could flow attitudes that would diminish racism.

Respect for the religious and cultural commitments of others, from which could flow a better foundation for a healthy multicultural society.

Respect for oneself, from which could flow attitudes that might reduce alcohol and drug abuse.

Respect for property, one's own and others; from which could flow a perspective that would reduce vandalism.

Respect for our democratic system and its institutions, from which can flow an appreciation of the fact that liberty does not mean absolute licence to do anything we want regardless of how it affects others.

There are, as I said, merely examples. To develop a definitive list – especially in a society as diverse as ours – is not an easy job. But I believe it can be done.

I believe, and I think the times *require,* that a position be taken by the public school system. Moral education must be suited to our times and the needs of the students. We must make the effort. As Horace Mann said in the early 19th Century: "The all-important question still remains: by what spirit are our schools animated? Do they cultivate the higher faculties in the nature of childhood – its conscience, its benevolence, a reverence for whatever is true . . . "

Discipline and moral guidance begin at home, and a child's developing outlook on life depends primarily on the example set by parents and, to some extent, by friends. But the school can and should extend this process in every possible way.

As a child grows in knowledge and understanding, surely the school can help him also find some measure of wisdom. And, since this is a Sunday, for my remarks I have taken as a text – Book of Proverbs 3rd chapter 13th verse:

"Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding."

Thank you.

Additional copies of this reprint are available from:

Communication Services
Ontario Ministry of Education
Mowat Block
14th Floor
Queen's Park, Toronto
Ontario, M7A 1L4

8153